

Marko Stamenković

University of Ghent, Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences

Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry (CEVI), Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium

marko.stamenkovic@live.com

Title

Thanatological Pluralism and the Epistemic Openness of ‘Death’

Abstract

This article discusses the conceptual ambiguities in relation to the current definitions of ‘death’. It addresses the need for an essentially pluralistic approach that probes the limits of epistemic singularity and perceives death as an *open* concept. Despite the views dependent upon the irrevocable termination of existence, I assume the opposite: first, that there are manifold ways to respond philosophically to the issue, without giving priority to any sovereign or prescribed position; second, that the plurality of unequally convincing positions opens up the ‘democratic’ space of negotiations about life and death as a political space par excellence, privileged by philosophy. Finally, my thesis about the thanatological pluralism gets closer to what I shall call the ‘political philosophy of death’ in the future studies of the issue, here insufficiently explored.

Key words

death, knowledge, thanatological philosophy, epistemic sovereignty, pluralism, politics

Thanatological Pluralism and the Epistemic Openness of 'Death'

Introduction

What is death? The present article assumes that there are manifold ways to respond philosophically to this seemingly simple and unavoidable question. One possible and common answer would be that “death is an unequivocal and permanent end of our existence” (Nagel 1979: 1). The relationship between ‘death’ and ‘existence’ is here crucial and framed by the idea of irrevocable termination. It denotes that, with the state of life’s completion, the existence reaches its end-point whereas death comes to play. Accordingly, the concept of human life – in terms of its final closure – depends upon the end of existence which, in turn, makes the concept of death not only definable but also conceived as a totality that remains essentially *closed*.

The present paper starts from this common and ‘hermetic’ conception as a normative way of approaching death. It assumes such a conception to be conditioned by what I shall call the *radical break formula* (the end of existence = death). This implies the notion of death as the category belonging to a certain epistemic rationality subjected to the sovereign universe of knowledge. This view is hegemonic inasmuch as it dominates over discourses on death through the prescribed radical break formula as *sine qua non* and outlines ‘death’ in its clear-cut segregation from ‘life’. In what follows, I have undertaken the task of challenging this formula in response to the need for alternative proposals. To propose alternative viewpoints is to face the ideas of death from other perspectives that are not only possible but also legitimate in comparison to the epistemic singularity of radical break.

The main thesis that this paper aims at articulating probes the limits of epistemic singularity and its sovereignty on numerous levels, most notably via the understanding of death as an *open* concept. My main argument revolves around the need to break away from the ‘radical break’ between our ideas of existence and death. I have adopted the “concept of the human being as essentially open to the future” where “the essential openness of the Being-ahead-of-itself does not ontologically imply an end” (Schumacher 2011:214). Therefore, I will argue that the epistemic horizons of contemporary thanatological thinking should not be limited by the idea of life’s irrevocable termination at the end-point of existence as a given; instead, they should be encountered from a broader viewpoint – or the multitude of viewpoints – allowing for the open concept of death to co-exist in the thanatological ‘economy’ of arguments undergoing the experiences of pluralistic exchange. The plurality of our knowledge-worlds of death encompasses the *multitude of unequally convincing positions* and transgresses the singularity of any epistemic sovereignty that claims to be universal or the most convincing. This ‘transgressive’ epistemic experience could also help us approach the matters of life and death in a very different vein than it has been the case. Thanks to the current theoretical, scientific and technological legitimacy of such plurality, the thanatological inquiries nowadays have expanded our views: they open up the space for manifold arguments in discussions and negotiations about the status and values of death in contemporary philosophy as well as in everyday life. This implies that the subject itself has gained not only its more ‘democratic’ but a profoundly political status. This is, most notably, in terms of the many (unequal and unequally convincing) positions about ‘death’ and death-related arguments, challenged in the philosophical space of negotiation as a political space *par excellence*. To pave the way toward the philosophy of death as a matter of politics is what constitutes the long-term aim of this study. Beside its good aspects, this also gives us an opportunity to encounter the contested side of the issue: the polemical and controversial

instrumentality of ‘death’ under control of sovereign powers, be it epistemic or otherwise. With that in mind, the present paper questions the strict division between ‘death’ and ‘existence’. It offers arguments in favor of a conceptual ambiguity that leaves the borders between life and death open and embraces ‘death’ as a concept “projected toward the future” (Schumacher 2011: 214). Finally, my thesis about the thanatological pluralism gets closer to what I shall call the ‘political philosophy of death’ in the future studies of the issue, here insufficiently explored.¹

1. Radical break formula and counter-positions

The radical break formula, as I have named it hereby, relates to the aforementioned definition that conceives of death as an unequivocal and permanent end of our existence. According to it, the idea of death relates to the idea of existence through an irrevocable condition (‘the end’). What basically determines this condition is the *radical break* of existence: its ‘end’ – in the absolute, unambiguous and abiding sense – equals ‘death’ or what we commonly understand by the term signifying death (‘the end of life’). If this formula (the end of existence = death) was true it would indicate the following: death, in order to be properly defined, needs to be primarily conceived vis-à-vis existence, yet always under conditions where the suggested radical break must occur; otherwise, the end of existence would not necessarily equate with death.

However, if ‘death’ is the end-point of existence – or the point of its ultimate deduction – this may also be considered as a starting-point from which our idea of death,

¹ The fundamental connection between the limits of (epistemic) sovereignty and the exercise of control over mortality here comes to play through what Mbembe calls ‘necropolitics’ in his seminal work on the politics of death (Mbembe 2003).

actually, begins. In other words, death begins where the concept of human being *opens* toward the future, as Schumacher argues, instead of closing itself off. If the end (of existence) also marks the beginning (of death) we may assume that the earlier definition of death – as an unequivocal and permanent end of our existence – is both insufficient and unsatisfactory. The end of one phenomenon (‘existence’) does not necessarily define another phenomenon (‘death’). The radical break formula is thus wrong as the relationship between the two phenomena is far more complex. Existence and death participate together in a paradoxical situation where they exclude each other at the same point where they also merge with each other. This is to say that the line of their segregation is, simultaneously, the line of their mutual juncture. It is also the borderline across which our ideas of *the end* (of ‘existence’) and *the beginning* (of ‘death’) come together. This argument, though it may sound polemical, comes about as relevant because of the duality of the issue: we assume that our idea of ‘the end’ of existence (in terms of its finitude) necessarily includes another idea, opposite to the earlier one, which is the ‘beginning’ of death in terms of its ‘openness’ or infinitude. Therefore, death – although inherent to existence – cannot be defined exclusively in relation to existence on the premises of being its end-point.² The next question is: if ‘death’ could be defined at all, how *can* it be defined otherwise than through the formula of radical break?

Given the insufficient argumentation of the initial definition, death could be approached as an end of our existence *only under condition* that its permanence is characterized by the unequivocal closure of everything pertaining to our idea of existence (the notion of ‘everything’ hereby also includes death, as we are supposed to accept that death is

² Bernard N. Schumacher, for example, goes against life’s deduction to an end-point. He defends the thesis on death’s freedom to remain open rather than “connected with a finite temporality” when he argues that “human life is not perceived as a closed totality”. In that sense, his “critique of Heidegger’s and Scheler’s theses on death is based on a concept of the human being as essentially open to the future, as a free projection toward the future. This projection is not limited ontologically, nor in an *a priori* manner, nor from the subjective viewpoint – as both Nagel and Sartre have emphasized – by an end, which is to say that the subject does not have an *a priori* consciousness of the fact that the field of his possibilities is narrowing” (Schumacher 2011: 214).

the end-point *of* existence, i.e. something *internal* to existence and not *external to* it). Nonetheless, my argument goes against such a view: death *should not be* defined only as an end of our existence since the end-point of existence (supposedly ‘death’ itself) also marks the beginning of our ideas of death in their opening beyond that ‘end-point’. Following this logic, the beginning/openness of death occurs *under condition of* ‘non-existence’ – not under condition of ‘existence’. This means: when existence reaches its ‘end-point’ – which is not ‘death’ – this is the starting-point of ‘non-existence’ or the point from which our idea of death opens to the future, infinitely.

Let us consider another perspective by which the mandatory formula of radical break is, for any reason, negated. What is the result of this negation? The situation established earlier (concerning the mutual exclusion of ‘death’ and ‘existence’ by the category of ‘the end’) will also be changed. The relationship of radical break between the category of death and the category of existence now turns out to be different and gives results of another kind. First, it disturbs the given set of proposed parameters to have life defined as a closed totality and brings the initial definition of death to the status of its own subversion. Second, it endangers any common or normative interpretation of death centering so stubbornly on the either-or situation via the radical break formula (implying, once again, that there is *either* ‘existence’ *or* its ‘end’). If the radical break formula is temporarily overthrown or dismissed it means that our general idea of death does *not* absolutely and unambiguously stand at the very end of our existence. If death does not stand at the end of existence, the question is – where does it stand instead? Yet, from the viewpoint centered on ‘radical break’, if the existence has no ‘end’ there is no ‘death’; where there is ‘the end’ there is ‘death’ but there is *no more* existence; this means that ‘death’ is *only* there where there is the state of ‘non-existence’.

According to the radical break formula, the appearance of death (equated with ‘the end’ and, moreover, with ‘the end of existence’) necessarily coincides with the disappearance

of existence. Hence, to be dead is to stop existing. Following the previous logic, the cease of existence announces the *beginning of non-existence*. Yet, we earlier assumed that death is also the ‘beginning’: the beginning of ‘death’ coincides with the beginning of ‘non-existence’. In other words, when ‘to be dead’ means ‘to stop existing’ it is the appearance of non-existence that starts emerging behind the disappearance of existence. If death overlaps with the beginning of non-existence, does this argument automatically imply that death *does not exist*? Even if death does not exist at all, our presumption is that this argument says *something* about death: death as ‘non-existence’. What else does it say in addition? Or, what is it that this argument does not say enough so our suspicion about death as ‘non-existence’ goes on? This kind of suspicion allows us to proceed with the discussion that must be *differently positioned* toward the ideas of death, existence, non-existence, and so on. The configuration of such positioning, however, needs to be made clear. To approach it, I would like to ask the following: if non-existence is the ‘other’ of existence does it also mean that death is playing the role of the ‘other’ with regard to existence? If the answer is positive, what constitutes the Otherness of death? Is death the ‘other’ of life in terms of its different nature that is, supposedly, better or worse than the nature of life?

Nagel, among many others, adds to our discussion by asking “whether it is a bad thing to die” (Nagel 1979: 1). This allows us to treat death as the (potential) ‘evil’ side of existence due to the fact that it takes away life – or the ‘good’ side of existence – into non-existence. If death is understood as the beginning of non-existence (that is, supposedly, ‘bad’) another question arises: is it better or worse not to exist *at all* (or not to exist *anymore*) than to exist ‘partially’? If we assume the possibility of partial existence, we also need to come to terms with what it exactly means. What makes the status of one’s existence ‘partial’ is what brings a novel element to our discussion in comparison to any definite idea of existence and non-existence, respectively. Therefore, this in-between option connects to (or collides with) the

normative views about the idea of death as a clear-cut borderline between ‘death’ and ‘existence’ – between our ‘sense’ of existence and our ‘sense’ of non-existence (or the ‘non-sense’ of existence, to which I will return in the third chapter of this paper).

2. The ambiguity of ‘partial existence’

The arguments about the partial status of existence go directly against the clear-cut segregation or the so-called radical break formula between ‘existence’ and ‘death’. Hence, the ambiguity of existence (its ‘partial’ status, so to say) disturbs the preconceived ‘regimes of truth’ with respect to the radical end-point of existence as an indispensable condition for a human being to die. This complies with what contemporary bioethical theorists have in mind when approaching “life-ending principles by considering death [through] some conceptual distinctions crucial to a proper discussion” (Holland 2003: 68). The subject of life-ending has remained one of the key points in contemporary bio-ethical debates where the hardly definable nature of death is not only treated as a problem but also as a challenge to our existent knowledge-worlds. To respond to the initial question (about what death is) from a bioethical position thus becomes an impossible task “unless we separate different questions about death, and the various terms related to them” (Holland 2003: 69).

When Stephen Holland discusses the issue he insists upon the fact that it is not the ambiguity of death itself but *the ambiguity of our concept of death* which leads to conflicts between the various ways we approach the issue. Several interrelated instances play significant roles here, the most prominent ones being the two prevailing and confronting medical accounts of death: cardio-respiratory and brain-related. From a comparative perspective, the latter took the priority from the former with the occurrence of “a major shift in recent decades in our policy on death [...] largely due to improvements in health

technologies” (Holland 2003: 70). With the appearance of life-support machines, the earlier criteria for death (heart and lungs-related diagnosis centered on cardio-respiratory systems) gave way to the new criteria centered on the state of the brain. More concretely, this relates to the “permanent functional death of the brain stem or irreversible absence of cellular activity in the brain stem [as] the immediate precursor to brain death”.³ To highlight the precision by which medicine defines death, Holland adds that “it’s the demise of certain crucial parts of the brain that matters” and points out that “a patient is diagnosed as dead when their brain stem is dead”.⁴ He maintains that, “at root, the problem is that we think about death in two ways: the end of consciousness and the demise of the human organism” (Holland 2003: 68). What he basically refers to (Holland 2003: 74) is twofold: first, we need to consider the biological and the ontological accounts of *living* human beings as organisms and persons; also, we need to distinguish between the biological and the ontological accounts of *dying* human beings as either *organisms* (if their “functional integrity of the organism” is irreversibly ceased) or as *persons* (if their “capacity for consciousness” is permanently ruined). This is important, he continues, because “getting the right account of death might inform life-ending judgments” (Holland 2003: 74), but especially because it concerns the so-called *ambiguous cases or ambiguous bodies* “such as anencephalic infants or PVS patients” (Holland 2003: 74). When these cases occur the diagnostic precision about functional or non-functional brain-parts needs to be even more specific (Holland 2003: 72). This means that the definition of a dead patient must distinguish the upper part of the brain (physiological commands) from the lower part of the brain (consciousness). To accept this *conceptual ambiguity* – perhaps the most fundamental one for our understanding of death through the bioethical lenses – means that our initial discussion around the so-called radical break (between ‘death’ and ‘existence’) must be taken much more critically into account and, also, much more seriously.

³ Lamb 1994: 1036-7, as quoted in Holland, *Bioethics*, Ibid., p. 71.

⁴ Mohandas and Chou 1971, as quoted in Holland, *Bioethics*, Ibid., p. 71.

My intention is not to go too deep into the discussion about the conceptual ambiguity of death. What is important is that Holland's bioethical views outline some possible scopes of thinking about death beyond the preconceived radical break formula and the constitution of death as 'the end' of existence. In that regard, Holland offers three methods of primary significance that contribute to the contemporary ways we *could* think about death differently than taking its status of 'the end-point of existence' for granted. Says Holland:

It's crucial to a proper discussion of this question that three separate, though related, sets of issues are clearly distinguished. The first is *epistemological*. It's about what we know. The central question here is: how do we know whether this patient is dead or alive? Related to this is a question as to how we find out about the state of the patient. How are we to diagnose the patient's condition? So terms central to the epistemological question are diagnosis of, and criteria and tests for, death. The second issue is *metaphysical*. It's about what exists. The central question here is: does the world contain a live patient or a dead body? So it's not about our knowledge but about the metaphysical facts. The third issue is *conceptual*. It's about defining the concept of death. We use the word 'death' to capture the concept. So crucial questions here are: what do we understand by the concept of death, or what does the word 'death' mean? (Holland 2003: 69)

Questioning death through the radical break formula – or against it – is here framed by the conceptual inquiry of the issue. The persistent problem, however, consists in the fact that the bio-ethical discussions have taken so many different angles (about what constitutes the end of one's life and what doesn't) that our current idea of death, with all the ambiguity that it contains, easily slips into very contested and polemical hermeneutic terrains. Although

Holland's distinctions, as outlined above, are indeed important for the inquiry at hand, they seem to contribute to our discussion (in either epistemological, metaphysical or conceptual sense) to the extent from which we are brought back once again to the beginning of this paper: so, what is death?

3. The 'nonsense' of death

So far we have seen that the meditations on death can undergo more than one singular method (un)related to the so-called radical break formula: for example, if Nagel treats death as a closed totality, then Schumacher sees it as an open concept, while Holland insists on its conceptual ambiguity. While it is still possible to approach death as something that *is* (death as 'the end', as 'openness', as 'the privation of existence') there are also debates that approach death as something that, essentially, *isn't* (death as 'nothing', as 'non-existence', as 'non-sense'); through the 'nothingness' of death they center on its fundamental state of *not being* or being nothing else but 'no sense'. One of such approaches complies with the famous ancient dictum that death is "nothing to us".⁵ Epicurus says the following:

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the *privation* of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality. For there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life. Thus, he is a fool who says that he fears death

⁵ See, for instance: James Warren, "Removing Fear," in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, James Warren (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 242–243. See also: James Warren, *Facing Death. Epicurus and his Critics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2004.

not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come. For that which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist (Epicurus 1994: 29).

His argument is here a valid reference point especially in what concerns the ‘feeling’ of life as opposed to the ‘non-feeling’ of death, as he says, “for all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience” (Epicurus 1994: 29). So, to speak of death is to speak of the situation of privation; furthermore, it is to speak of the experience deprived of senses or the *experience of non-sense*. Following these lines of thought, let us consider once again the initial formula of radical break by focusing on it from a slightly different perspective. Instead of paying too much attention to the mutual exclusion between its two constitutive elements (‘existence’ and ‘death’), I will connect to my earlier expressed comment. By the end of the first chapter, I mentioned that the standard views on death revolve around the clear-cut borderline between, on the one hand, our ‘sense’ of existence and, on the other hand, our ‘sense’ of non-existence (or the ‘non-sense’ of existence). Starting from this, it is the presumable ‘nonsense’ of existence that – at this point of discussion – I want to focus on. One could also add, cynically enough, that discourses on death as a ‘non-sense’ must assume the experience of *nonsense*. Hence, to experience nonsense is to bring the category of ‘stupidity’ to the discussion or to make the whole discussion ‘foolish’ (*senseless*) in terms of ignorance – in particular in terms of the essential ignorance about our own death. Is the non-sense of existence an argument valid enough to replace our imaginary of death as the kind of nonsense (i.e. the state of affairs deficient in both meanings and senses and, thus, essentially ‘foolish’)? If this is really the case, does our

discourse on death deserve any further attention, given that the ‘meaningfulness’ of all previous propositions has already been eradicated and replaced by ‘meaninglessness’ (the nonsense in terms of death ‘without sense’ or of its total ‘senselessness’)?

Epicurus understands death as the empty place of meaning occupied by something that (in its ‘nothingness’) is “irrelevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist [so] the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad” (Epicurus 1994: 29). Instead of complying with him, I would preferably focus my attention onto the very relationship between our ‘knowledge’ of death (or rather our ignorance, in terms of ‘nonsense’, the state of mind deprived of any fundamental knowledge of our own death) and the presumed nothingness of death (in terms of its state of being deprived of any sense, or its senselessness linked to non-sense). One of my points of analysis are the conditions upon which the modality of the verb *to be* (‘is’) operates while squeezed between ‘death’ and ‘nothing’ in the sentence ‘death *is* nothing to us’. I find it significant hereby for the following reason: it delineates a discursive void, the kind of *epistemic emptiness* within which a world-system centered on life has privileged its basic property (the ‘meaningful something’ pertaining to ‘life’, as life is ‘everything to us’) against the basic property of death (the ‘meaningless nothing’ pertaining to ‘death’).⁶ What matters now is the last remaining segment of the phrase ‘death is nothing *to us*’. It might be of crucial importance since it introduces the

⁶ Accordingly, biopolitics (understood as the politics of life) has been in charge of producing the discourses on living and life-management while obscuring those on death and dying. Whether this has been a programmatic and strategic choice imposed by the epistemic sovereignty centered on life, remains an open question. When the Canadian philosopher Stuart Murray questions the fundamental lack of death from our discourses on (good) life, he rightfully highlights their ‘exclusionary right’ to exist against the backdrop of obscurity imposed on the question of death. Says Murray: “Death informing life’ will seem counter-intuitive or even insane to us because, as Foucault has claimed, in the last two centuries we no longer properly *speak* of death. Discourses on death are as forgotten and disavowed as the nameless and innumerable deaths themselves. In the last two centuries, Foucault argues, political and sovereign discourses have focused instead on *life*. Life has eclipsed death. In the name of life, the ‘mass grave’ has become popularized, making death(s) nameless and innumerable, obscure and obscured” (Murray 2006: 192–193).

subject of knowledge applied to death: for *who* is this subject (the sovereign ‘connoisseur’ of death) so he or she could claim that death is everything, something, or nothing to us? Who is in possession of the epistemic power to claim the ultimate validity of either of those statements in order to argue about death from any superior position of knowledge?

Here we must come to terms with our own position towards the presumed nothingness of death. ‘To us’, who are still living, death might still mean nothing. Nonetheless, when I refer *to us*, this stands for those who are not only living but also – and consciously – dying human beings, including those who are now absent (as they are already dead). The latter concerns, in particular, *the one among us* (namely, Epicurus himself) to whom the sentences in the earlier quote have been applied, according to the *Letter to Menoeceus*.⁷ Though pronounced and written during his own lifetime, Epicurus’s words have remained to buzz till the present as if he was still alive – though we know he is not. Hence, if ‘death is nothing to us’ then the death of the one who said so (more than two thousand years ago) should also be treated as part of the logic of nothingness (senselessness, non-sense, nonsense, etc.). This means that the argument about death (as nothingness) – on behalf of the one who is no more alive (i.e. who is no more ‘among us’) – could be taken into account only critically: with respect to his own absence from the world of life (i.e. his own ‘nothingness’) as well as with respect to his own idea of death (as ‘nothingness’).

This kind of inquiry leads us to the following conclusion: to talk about death cannot be exhausted by our discussions centered on the criteria of knowledge around any either-or situation (such as the terminal end of existence or the radical break between existence and non-existence through death). Instead, to talk about death means to negotiate the plurality of

⁷ For the Epicurean dictum on death and its most recent critical revision see B. Schumacher, *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 151–167; 168–181. Also: James Warren, *Facing Death. Epicurus and His Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For English translations of Epicurus’s *Letter to Menoeceus* see, for example, *Epicurus, The Epicurus Reader. Selected Writings and Testimonia*, Brad Inwood (ed.), Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (trans.), Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1994; and Norman Wentworth De Witt, *St. Paul and Epicurus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1954, pp. 187–193.

unequally convincing positions by which ‘death’ (the non-sense of existence) becomes exposed alongside our essential *ignorance* about death (the ‘nonsense’ of existence). It is not the ‘nothingness’ of death but the essential nothingness of our knowledge about death that makes the thanatological discussions challenging and worth continuing in the field of philosophy. It is through this ignorance around the ‘nonsense of death’, ironically speaking, that our unequally convincing positions about death converge around ‘the termination of one’s life’ or ‘the end of one’s existence’ or its ‘partiality’ or its ‘nothingness’, and so on. Hence, if there is any subject of knowledge that, in our fundamental ignorance, continuously imposes the barriers to our possibility of knowing anything about it with certainty, then ‘death’ must be that subject. In terms of this kind of (positive) ignorance I have claimed that to experience nonsense is to bring the category of ‘stupidity’ to the discussion or to make the whole discussion ‘foolish’ (*senseless*).

4. The Imperative of Death

In the previous chapter I claimed that the ultimate position we can take with regard to the ‘knowledge’ of death is the one of essential ignorance. Yet, there is one thing regarding death that we can be certain about or we can know it already now, while living, despite our ignorance: “we are all going to die”.⁸ If there is one single thing we can be sure of and if that ‘thing’ is death – our own death – we can also properly assume the following: the only certainty that life gives us and the only certainty we could have in life is the inevitability of death. Those who openly admit their fundamental ignorance with respect to death, including myself, can equally confirm that the only certainty they could have in all their ignorance (about the subject that, incessantly, keeps them being so ignorant) is that *death is inexorable*.

⁸ See Shelly Kagan, *Death. The Open Yale Courses Series*, <http://oyc.yale.edu/philosophy/phil-176>. Accessed October 26, 2013. Also: Shelly Kagan, *Death*, Yale University Press, Durham 2012.

Let us now assume that the imperative of death is the prime condition in the world of life and living. It means that the only certainty we could have, about our own selves and about the others who are sharing the experience of living with us, is the certainty of dying. In accordance with such an assumption, many would most probably defend the following view: what binds us all together (as all living beings on Earth, including animals and plants) is exactly the category of equality with respect to dying. Due to this fact, we are all sharing the same *position of equality* with respect to our own death and the many deaths of the others. Hence, all living creatures are equal exactly because they are dying creatures. Let us also assume that this position of our ‘universal equality’ is unquestionable.

Yet, we know that we are not all equal in life even if our ‘universal equality’ appears to be unquestionable with respect to the presumable ‘end-point’ of our existence (death itself). The assumption expressed hereby is that we are *all* going to die which makes us all equal. Yet, as Shelly Kagan points out, “once we accept that fact, the questions begin” (Kagan, online). Which questions? There are many. Kagan particularly pays attention to those that he himself finds the most relevant in the entire spectrum of inquiries. They are, namely: “How should the fact that I am going to die affect the way that I *live*? What should my attitude be toward my mortality?” (Kagan 2012: 2). This is the point from which the presumed universal equality of living beings starts to erode towards their ‘inequality’. We could argue that the so-called death anxiety or the fear of death hides behind this erosion. If we take those fears into account, are we afraid of death because it is something *negative* to us? If we put those fears aside, will this leave the space open for anything *positive* with regard to our own death?

Let us now assume that there is a basic difference between these two categories. On the one hand, there are those who fear their own death – those who do not want ‘to give their lives away,’ so to say, or those who understand death in negative terms. On the other hand, there are those who fear their own death less, or do not fear it at all: those who do not mind

giving their lives away, so to say, or those who prefer ‘taking their own lives’ (those who are prone to commit suicide or to sacrifice their lives for a certain cause, or to fight in military battles, for example, or anyone who might consider death in somewhat less negative or – even – positive terms). This elementary distinction brings us closer to an important counter-argument regarding the earlier proposed view about the essential equality of living beings in death (hereby I refer only to the *humans*), namely: that the position of humankind is *not equal* when it comes to our attitudes toward death. This is where we encounter at least two types of human beings: those who ‘fear’ and those who ‘do not fear’ death. Additionally, we are no more equal when it comes to our arguments about death: those who fear death stand at a distance from those who fear it less and at the opposite side from those who may not fear it at all. Those who have predominantly negative attitudes toward death (including their own death) will defend their position upon the premises that distinguish them from those who have less negative or even positive attitudes toward death. Therefore, to argue about death is to accept, first and foremost, the essential condition of ‘*inequality*’ among the humankind balancing between the populations’ ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ attitudes toward death. This condition of inequality results, again, from our state of fundamental ignorance regarding death; this ignorance is framed by ‘inequality’ in terms of disagreements and unequally convincing positions operating in-between the many knowledge-worlds of death and not within a singular, supposedly unquestionable, epistemic paradigm.

Conclusion

For any discussion that is expectedly or unexpectedly irresolvable, ‘death’ represents one of the most pertinent subjects: it imposes the ultimate frontier to knowledge. However, the essential ignorance regarding our own deaths allows us to argue *differently* over the subject of

death: thanks to this difference, we are also allowed to have *one thing in common* that is shared by all the arguing positions, no matter how different they are. This is the preliminary condition one has to face when approaching death as the subject of thinking, of speech, of imagining (in terms of visions or ‘images’ of one’s own death). Starting from my own ignorance of death I could say: for an ignorant state of mind human death is but a challenge to test one’s own limits – of thinking, of speech, of imagining. Accordingly, my own ignorance – in relation to the subject of death and in relation to death as the philosophical subject – is precisely the *topos* where the focal point of this paper must be situated. My own piece of scholarly writing, about the subject that I am fundamentally ignorant about, is destined to grow from the very roots of my own and absolute ignorance, which belongs to me as much as it can be shared by any other living human being. This also allows me to contest any ‘knowledge’ of death that tends to claim its epistemic sovereignty over the issue. If to hold the power of the knowledge-worlds of death is to keep humankind under control over their own mortality, then this means: to exercise sovereignty over the world of living by means of ‘death’ as the tool of governance. Therefore, to speak *about* death is to resist such sovereignty and to accept the fact about *unequally convincing positions* on behalf of those involved in discussing death and dying. Yet, to speak about death obliges us to *negotiate* these unequally convincing positions: by entering the space of negotiation – which is a *political space* par excellence – the challenge is how to execute a radical turn against the epistemic sovereignty of death (one of its manifestations being the radical break formula, for example). If to negotiate unequally convincing positions on death means to challenge our general positions – in the world of subjects that are essentially *unequal* – then it also means to question the humankind’s inequality at large. Additionally, it means to challenge our ideas on equality and inequality through the very question of *justice* exercised over the idea of death, including its enactment and the ‘sovereign’ right to do so (for example, by killing someone, by having

someone killed, or by letting someone die). This is the main reason why the main question in this paper is not about what death *is* or what it *is not*. Instead, the arguments exposed hereby are leading us toward other questions that might be more relevant for some future inquiries. One of them is: *who* is the subject of knowledge with respect to death? These and related issues, which have been explored by Mbembe (2003), among others, will be the matter of our discussion in the future studies.

References

- Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15 (1/2003), pp. 11-40.
- Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1979.
- Stephen Holland, *Bioethics. A Philosophical Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003.
- Shelly Kagan, *Death*, Yale University Press, Durham 2012.
- Shelly Kagan, *Death*. The Open Yale Courses Series, <http://oyc.yale.edu/philosophy/phil-176>. Accessed October 26, 2013.
- James Warren, *Facing Death. Epicurus and His Critics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004.
- Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader. Selected Writings and Testimonia*, Brad Inwood (ed.), Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (trans.), Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge 1994.
- Norman Wentworth De Witt, *St. Paul and Epicurus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1954.
- Bernard N. Schumacher, *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2010.